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Editorial: Degrowth or Regrowth?

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Degrowth or Regrowth?

If you ask people what they remember most about the financial crisis of 2008 you are likely to hear phrases such as the subprime bubble, toxic assets, Bear Stearns or Northern Rock. As an environmentalist, the main focus of my recollections is slightly different. What I remember most vividly was the desperation with which central bankers and politicians sought to immediately chart a path that would lead us out of economic recession and back to economic growth. It appeared that, regardless of the financial, social and environmental costs associated with unfettered economic growth, the primary political priority was to return us to the collective safety and prosperity that only growth could secure. The subsequent lowering of interest rates, quantitative easing and reductions in value added tax rates were all devoted to increasing consumption, stimulating production and re-growing the economy.

The unthinking pursuit of a ‘V-Shaped’ recovery from recession back to growth is a feature of the prevailing neo-liberal assumption that the expansion of the economy is the *sine qua non* of a happy and affluent society (Jackson, 2003; Peck, 2010). The financial crisis was, however, utilised by some to critically think about our collective devotion to growth. In July 2008, just as the economic crisis was beginning to unfold, the New Economics Foundation proposed a clear-sighted and inspiring vision of a *Green New Deal* (2008). As an ecological equivalent of Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the *Green New Deal* suggested that the economic crisis represented an opportunity to build a new type of economy, within which the creation of economic prosperity was not senselessly decoupled from environmental issues (cf. Mauerhofer, 2013; Spash, 2012). But 2008 also witnessed the re-emergence of a broader socio-ecological movement that was mobilised around a critique of the growth ethic itself. In April 2008 academics and activists gathered in Paris for *Economic De-Growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity Conference*. The declaration that followed this conference called ‘for a paradigm shift from the general and unlimited pursuit of economic growth to a concept of “right-sizing” the global and national economies’ (Declaration of the Parties, 2008). This conference helped to establish and popularise the notion of degrowth, and laid the foundation for an intellectual, political and cultural movement that has become a prominent feature of radical environmental politics.

Despite its formalisation in 2008, the political and intellectual antecedents of degrowth stretch back at least as far as the 1970s. It was during the mid- to late-1970s that the word *Décroissance* (the French word for degrowth) was first mentioned in the work of writers such as André Gorz and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. The word was not, however, utilised as an activist slogan until after 2000. While there are many definitions of degrowth, according to the Research and Degrowth association ‘Sustainable degrowth is a downscaling of

production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet' (2012). On these terms it is important to note that degrowth is predicated on two principles: 1) that economic activity must not exceed the carrying capacity of the biosphere; and 2) that economic activity should focus on enhancing human well-being and happiness and not on the avaricious pursuit of wealth. In the first, ecological context, it is clear that degrowth has much in common with strong versions of sustainability. In the second, social context, degrowth echoes the emerging body of work that is exposing the psychological costs and social injustices of contemporary patterns of economic growth. This accepted understanding of the meaning of degrowth is the product of a series of four major conference on the subject (held in Barcelona, Montreal, Venice and, of course, Paris), and a series of important publications (see Fournier, 2008; Kallis, 2011; Latouche, 2010; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Trainer, 2012).

Despite the obvious connections between degrowth and a range of sister concepts (such as limits to growth and sustainable development), it is important to remember what is unique about the concept. The distinguishing feature of the concept of degrowth is that it brings attention to the nature and effects of growth. In classical economics, growth is associated with the healthy functioning of a free market economy. On these terms economic growth produces the profit motivation, is a requisite of effective market competition, and enables the most efficient distribution of economic goods and investment. Degrowth isolates the growth dynamic that infuses the modern world in order to consider the socio-ecological externalities that it produces. Beyond these intellectual endeavours, however, the degrowth movement is also responsible for thinking about how it might be possible to image a downsized world, which is not dependent on growth. In this context, the degrowth movement has forged strong connections with bio-regionalism, permaculture, Transition initiatives, and the Slow Food and Voluntary Simplicity movements.

Although this is not the first special issue to be published on the topic of degrowth, this volume introduces some of the latest thinking and key areas of debate that now define the field. In the first paper in this special issue Muraca (2013) traces the varied roots of degrowth thinking within social and political philosophy. On the basis of this genealogy, Muraca suggests that degrowth is fundamentally an anti-systemic movement. On these terms, she argues that degrowth does not seek to replace one system (namely capitalism) with an alternative totality. Instead, Muraca suggests that degrowth is about developing a type of society within which political and economic structures do not reproduce themselves 'independently from the needs, aspirations, and desires of people'. Drawing on the work of Andre Gorz, Muraca consequently asserts that degrowth is about more than simply economic change, it is about the recalibration of political communities to ensure that the need of a given system are never placed above those of people or the planet.

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Building on the themes introduced within Muraca's paper, the second paper explores the relationship between degrowth and capitalism. Boonstra and Joosse (2013) describe the paradox that although degrowth and capitalism are clearly incompatible, degrowth must emerge (out of necessity) from a capitalist socio-economic system. Drawing on theories of path dependency and social mechanisms, and the example of food relocalisation initiatives in Uppsala (Sweden), this paper reveals that while degrowth may ultimately require a sharp break with capitalism at a macro-sociological level, in terms of everyday life this transition may involve a series of improvisational triggers in and through which small scale changes can lead to the emergence of alternative socio-ecological trajectories. Ultimately, this paper explores the social practices and conventions through which it may be possible for degrowth to establish itself within the modern world.

The third paper in this special issue explores the origins, evolution and practices of degrowth as a social movement. Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, and Martinez-Alier (2013) propose that degrowth be understood as representing a form of 'activist-led science', within which a movement for social and political change coalesces with the academic study of economic, social and environmental science in novel and creative ways. In charting the co-evolution of degrowth activism (within co-housing schemes and community gardens) and degrowth thinking (within ecological economics and political philosophy), Demaria et al. reveal the great diversity of practices and ideas that characterise degrowth. Rather than seeing such internal diversity as a weakness of the movement, Demaria et al. suggest that the multiplicity of the degrowth movement is key to its long term ability to have widespread appeal throughout the world.

The fourth paper focuses on the relationship between degrowth and democracy. The Barcelona Declaration emphasised the relationship between degrowth, voluntary action and participatory democracy. Asara Profumi and Kallis (2013) develop a critical review of democratic theory within work on degrowth. Focusing on a prominent debate within the degrowth field between Serge Latouche and Takis Fotopoulos – the relationship between democracy and autonomy – this paper considers the nature of the likely relations between democracy and degrowth. Drawing on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, Asara et al. acknowledge that while true democracy may not take a degrowth path, the ways in which degrowth challenges the hegemonic powers of capitalism suggests that it has the potential to enhance individual autonomy and our capacity for self-determination.

The fifth and sixth papers build on Asara et al.'s analysis of the relationship between degrowth and democracy. While Asara et al. consider the role of degrowth in nurturing more meaningful forms of ecological democracy, the two papers by Andrew Dobson (2013) and Stephen Quilley (2013) consider the

threats that a more resource constrained future may place on liberalism. Both Dobson and Quilley draw on the work of William Ophuls, and his claim that modern conceptions of liberal freedom have been based upon our exceptional era of resource abundance. In his paper, Andrew Dobson considers the new forms of political theory we may need for an era of resource scarcity. In particular he considers whether a world of resource scarcity will inevitably lead to a more violent, authoritarian world, or whether it will be possible to develop a low-energy version of cosmopolitanism. Stephen Quilley considers the practical lessons that can be learned from the work of Ophuls as we try and build a progressive degrowth society. Focusing specifically on the Transition Culture movement, Quilley claims that the Transition movement (and the broader degrowth agenda) is too sanguine in relation to the types of society it imagines will emerge in a lower energy future. Outlining a series of variables that are directly related to the size of human activity – including population size; levels of technological innovation; cultural diversity; energy through-put – Quilley suggests that constructing progressive and empowering worlds of degrowth will require the careful consideration of the impacts of energy descent and relocalisation on each of these variables in different geographical contexts.

In the final paper Alexander (2013) explores the emergence and potential of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement as a grassroots movement that is supporting lower levels of consumption and a better quality of life. Alexander argues that movements like voluntary simplicity are vital for moving to the post-consumerist society envisaged by advocates of degrowth. Drawing on social movement theory, he considers the potential role of grassroots movements in promoting the forms of macro socio-economic change associated with degrowth theories and practices.

Collectively, this special issue develops a range of new and innovative perspectives on questions of degrowth. Crucially, these perspectives are offered both by those who are closely associated with the degrowth movement and by those who are not. Ultimately, these papers help us to realise the complex issues and questions that are likely to confront a world that no longer wishes to pursue growth at all costs.

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